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READING IN CIRCLES

Sexuality and/as History in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*

by Michelle Smith

I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem is presented as a fictive (re)telling of the slave woman's story, by Tituba herself, to Maryse Condé. Tituba gives her reason for these "impassioned efforts to revoke her own disappearance from history" ("Foreword" xi) as simply wanting to be allowed her deserved part in the drama of history. Tituba deliberately sets out to tell the story of her life to "undo the stories [other people] had . . . woven about" her (11). But as sure as she is that "[her] people will keep [Tituba's] memory in their hearts and have no need for the written word" (176), Tituba nonetheless desires that people *read* [her] tale" [emphasis added] (150). The idea of not "hav[ing] gone down in history," of being nothing more than "a few lines in the many volumes," renders Tituba "speechless" (149). Her joy at hearing a song sung about her after her death is rendered genuinely, but the privileging of writing and her speechlessness in the face of her elision from History betrays a preoccupation of *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* around the construction of history in written words. I say "around" written history to argue that the text operates in circular modes and motifs toward articulation of this Caribbean slave woman who "had a fate that no one could remember" (149). Tituba writes "around" the only surviving historical record of her existence, the transcript of her witch-trial in Salem. By situating this snippet of history within her narrative, Tituba forces a recontextualization of History's reading of her life.

Now, the limits of the reader's suspended disbelief are certainly exceeded here. It is in no way credible that Tituba herself should include the written record of her trial verbatim. The transcript stands out in relief against the rest of the text, indicating to the reader that alternative strategies are going to be called for in understanding the project of *I, Tituba*. In other words, the alert reader realizes that Condé does not intend that the novel be read "straight"; we should instead, as I suggest, read it in circles.

Within the economy of the text, Tituba's (hi)story is written in circles. Scenes are played out only to be recalled, re-enacted, and—most importantly for the novel—rewritten. Tituba and her mother function almost as doubles in the text. Tituba recalls her early years by saying that "Yao had two children, my mother and me" (6). Tituba's second significant relationship with a woman echoes her mother's only significant relationship with another woman: both Tituba and Abena, as young women, enjoy very close relationships with Elizabeth Parris and Jennifer Davis, their respective mistresses. The slave and mistress are, in both pairs, close in age and "share an aversion" (38) to the master/husband. The most sinister recurrence of Abena's fate in

Tituba's life is their death: Tituba ends up on the gallows like her mother. It is a cruel irony that Tituba is hanged in execution of white men's hypocritical judgment of "all her crimes, *past and present*" [emphasis added] (172). In other words, even to the blaming of the victim, Tituba and her mother are read as a circularity encompassing the subjectivity of Caribbean womanhood.

Inscribing her own subjectivity—what she thought, why she did the things she did, who she cared for and by whom she was cared for—is Tituba's project. From her distant and strained relationship with her "son"/lover Iphigene, Tituba "addresses the question of the essence, of who she is, to the matter of sex" (Flannigan 310). But sex does not function as an open secret in *I, Tituba*. Tituba's hypersexual being(-ness) rather becomes the basic function of a dialectic on and around history and subjectivity between Maryse Condé and her reader.

Arthur Flannigan asks "how . . . the fact of affirming or denying sex and sexual desire [is] readable as ideology" (301). I would begin to answer this question by process of elimination: first of all, Condé certainly refuses to allow her protagonist's sexuality to be "readable" as feminist ideology. The women who enter Tituba's life, with the exception of Mama Yaya, are out of touch with Tituba's inner being. Tituba's mother, Abena, never truly loved her and was "constantly reminded . . . of the pain and humiliation" (6) of the rape by which Abena conceived Tituba. As a result, Abena never bonded with Tituba; even as an ancestor spirit, Abena is ignored more than heeded, tolerated more than appreciated. Tituba sees herself as the "daughter of [her adoptive father Yao's] will and imagination . . . daughter of *his* love" [emphasis added] (6). The early bonding, too, that Tituba shares with her mistress Elizabeth Parris comes to naught. When Reverend Parris strikes both of them, the "blood sealed [their] alliance" (41). Unfortunately, as Elizabeth's daughter and niece begin to play at being tortured by witchcraft, Elizabeth shows Tituba "a mother's ingratitude" (70) despite the slave woman's having saved both Elizabeth's and her daughter's lives with her healing arts. Tituba learns from this the (text's) truth of John Indian's statement that "Tituba . . . can't imagine the hypocrisy of the white man's world" (46).

The most dangerous trap the novel lays for seekers of female solidarity is the appearance of Hester Prynne in the Ipswich prison. This Hester is not the one we think we have received from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Quite the contrary: this Hester supposedly would not have "accepted the name a man gave her" and took a "number of potions, concoctions, purges and laxatives . . . during her [previous unwanted] pregnancies" in order to terminate them (96-97). This Hester would also have written Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* if given the chance, and is frustrated by the fact that as a consequence of Tituba's being "too fond of love," meaning here (hetero-)sexual relationships, Tituba can "never [be made] a feminist" (101). This interchange is improbable to the point of undermining the verisimilitude of the text up to this moment, as well as mercilessly parodying the very (received) notion of feminist rewriting.

Having adequately disposed of that set of possibilities, then—to return to Flannigan's question—makes Tituba's sexuality readable as ideology by forcing us to look not at what is being said, but at the way(s) in which the text says it. In addition to the previously discussed circularities of the text, it is also clear that insofar as Tituba's

project is (re)writing and recontextualizing her life story, her autobiographical act functions as an expression of “the talking sex.” Michel Foucault describes this as a social emblem “which one catches unawares and questions, and which, restrained and loquacious at the same time, endlessly replies” (77). The character Tituba acts as if it were “essential . . . to be able to draw from that little piece of [herself] not only pleasure but knowledge, and a whole subtle interchange from one to the other: a knowledge of pleasure, a pleasure that comes from knowing pleasure, a knowledge-pleasure” (77). From her self-reflexive musing “what was there about John Indian to make me sick with love for him? . . . I knew all too well where his main asset lay” (19) to her spirit-self’s “sometimes . . . urge to slip into someone’s bed to satisfy a bit of leftover desire” (178), knowledge and pleasure are themselves lovers that join, mingle and separate. As *I, Tituba* engages in Foucauldian “talking sex,” the novel circles toward situating “sex as history, as signification and discourse” (Foucault 78).

Over the course of the novel, Tituba herself emerges as less a character with understandable motivations, and more a convergent essence of supernatural manipulation and sexual behavior. But although she may be (written as) the mistress of nature-as-cosmos, she feels “instill[ed] in [her] the desire to be a slave” to nature-as-(sexual) body (140). How can this circularity be rendered readable? I would begin to read it by proposing that we read Tituba’s writing as her “conceal[ing] from [herself] the blinding evidence” of the meaning of her sexual being(-ness) so “that what is essential always eludes [her] so that [she] must always start out again in search of it” (Foucault 33). My larger point is that precisely because the evidence is “blinding,” Tituba’s continuing to miss it can only be a willful—but, importantly, uninscribed—act. What matters more than the actual verisimilitude of her story is Tituba’s (book’s) ability to circle around the stories that make up History.

Janet Patterson describes textual self-referentiality in the following way:

Through the use of repetitions, the text is duplicated [literally speaking it represents itself], and by presenting a particular syntagma or scene two, three, four times, it demonstrates its own capacity to generate meaning. (Smith 386)

The generated meaning with which I am concerned is the one that circles Tituba’s sexuality as the locus of ontological signification in the text. Tituba herself, just as she begins to explore her own sexuality, circles back to the scene of her conception. She wonders if her moans are echoes, if “that [was] how my mother had moaned in spite of herself when the sailor raped her,” and Tituba states that she “understood then why [Abena] had wanted to spare her body the second humiliation of a loveless possession” (15). This one sentence locks in what Foucault terms the “Logic of Sex” for Tituba; the readable ideology of *I, Tituba* is from that point determined to be “sex as history, as signification and discourse” (Foucault 78). The Caribbean, too, now drawn into this circle of “history,” of “signification and discourse,” can be read as having suffered the “humiliation of a loveless possession”: beneath the English, the French, the Spanish and the Dutch. The bittersweet, anguished moan of Abena’s pleasure (if that is indeed what it was) stands in sharp contrast to the gang-rape Tituba experienc-

es at the hands of the Puritan ministers in Salem. They want her to "confess that [the evils are her] doing, but that [she] did not act alone and [to] denounce her accomplices" (91). This she refuses to do, echoing the time Reverend Parris first struck her for saying "why should I confess?" (41). For her stubbornness, Tituba is reduced to "nothing more than a heap of suffering," and a particularly sexualized suffering at that. The ministers tie her down on the bed so that one can sit "squarely astride" Tituba to "hammer [her] face with his fists"; another one "lifted up [her] skirt and thrust a sharpened stick into the most sensitive part of [her] body, taunting [Tituba]: Go on, take it, it's John Indian's prick." It is only at this point that Tituba "finally began to realize what their intentions were" (91).

The problem of the (lack of) acuity of Tituba's perceptions is an important one. Arlene Smith asserts that, in general,

Maryse Condé's characters . . . try unsuccessfully to reach the deeper levels of their psyche from which they feel hopelessly remote. They are both acutely aware of their inner inconsistencies and of their own inability to reach a harmonious psychological and emotional balance. (387)

But contradictory to this theory, the Tituba written in this novel is not self-aware such that she could answer for herself the question of whether or not her "uncontrollable desire for a mortal man . . . wasn't . . . madness and betrayal" (19). I think Condé hints, deep beneath the surface of the text, that Tituba's "lack of awareness" is rather a refusal to inscribe such an awareness of her lack of success in reaching the deeper levels of her history. Tituba "fudges" the harmoniousness of her existence by (re)writing in her (hi)story the unity of the spirit world and the world of the living. Unfortunately, the overdone connections to nature and supernatural powers make us as skeptical as we come to suspect Condé is herself about this protagonist. Tituba's spirit-self tells us, "I am happy now. I can understand the past, read the present, look into the future . . . I'm in no hurry now that I'm free of that impatience that is peculiar to mortals." But then she finishes this (re)writing of her story with the absurdly disingenuous, "What is one life in relation to the immensity of time?" (178). Evidently *her* life was important enough, even to her spirit-self, in the "immensity of time" and the perfection of her knowledge and happiness, to cause her to once again try to articulate her own subjectivity.

Tituba speaks with an obeah man near the end of the narrative, and this conversation seems to be the moment out of which the volition to (re)write her life story grows. She asks herself, then, "did [the obeah man] mean that only death brings supreme knowledge? That while you are alive there's a boundary you can't cross? That I would have to resign myself to partial knowledge?" (150). Whatever the obeah man means, it is clear that Maryse Condé means—through Tituba—that one must certainly not be resigned to partial knowledge but to retell and reinscribe the ritual of knowing until the story becomes as "the river runs toward the sea like life running toward death and nothing can stop its course" (148). Especially not, I would argue, the sea itself, which is the source of all the river is, was and will become.

I think Maryse Condé is both having fun with the reader and making a serious critical point in using the sea as the governing motif of the novel. Like the story and Tituba herself, the narrative functions on various discursive wavelengths. Some readers will identify the Freudian allusiveness of the concurrent flooding of the text with sexuality and water. Tituba always thinks of lovemaking in terms of the sea; the sexual experience is “pitch[ing] and plung[ing] like a drunken boat on a choppy sea” (140). Also, Tituba was herself conceived on a ship. Her mother, newly stolen from Africa, “was raped by an English sailor on the deck of *Christ the King* . . . while the ship was sailing for Barbados” (3). The littoral space of the sea/land is also representative of Tituba’s birthright (or lack thereof) on the blurred racial boundaries as a mulatto. Tituba’s status as a mulatto, together with her desire to (re)write (her) history leads the reader to position Tituba as a figure for, as well as a person from, the racial metissage and cultural creolization¹ that is the Caribbean.

Right before the slave uprising for which Tituba is eventually hanged, the narrative revisits the scene of Tituba’s gang rape at the hands of the Puritan ministers: Tituba dreamed that Reverend Parris, John Indian and Christopher the maroon “came up to [her] holding a thick, sharpened stick and [she] screamed: No, no! Haven’t I already gone through that?” (164). Tituba *has* already gone through that, as her mother had before her. Tituba has even been a witness to her mother’s sexual victimization. Is it possible that Tituba has so little control over her body—or such great control over her sense of history, personal and otherwise—as to live the kind of sexuality she does? But then again, perhaps Tituba keeps “choosing” sex to avoid being forced to choose it. This is the same sort of double-gesture Condé makes in Tituba’s thinking about her mother’s rape: the violence of coercion and the experience of pleasure are commingled. Once one departs from the clear roles of shattered victim and all-powerful perpetrator, it becomes exceedingly difficult to read the limits of choice, will and desire “straight”—the concepts themselves become almost too convoluted.

I think that Maryse Condé would agree that the dilemma of this “choice,” and the anguished feeling of having “already gone through” this dilemma, is the perhaps perpetual sociohistorical position of the Caribbean, and in particular the French-speaking islands which are to this day Overseas Departments of France. The experience of colonialism has left these people in a “voluntary” relationship with their former/present oppressors. While *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* does not allegorize the specifics of the (French) West Indian sociohistorical situation, reading the novel in circles proves it to be a relevant meditation on “choices.” I therefore read the metanarrative as Condé’s working toward an understanding of Caribbean history that comprehends Abena’s moan as well as its echoes, and rewrites them all, over and over, to and from the depths of the Caribbean sea.

NOTES

1. See Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989.

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